Steps toward Revolution

Mercantilism Returns

You read about mercantilism earlier this quarter.

Key Features of Mercantilism

1. The economy is a "zero-sum" game, which means that a gain in one section of the economy means a loss elsewhere because total economic gains must equal total losses. Today we speak of "growing the economy," an idea a mercantilist regards as absurd.
2. Colonies exist solely to benefit their founding country. If a colony could not send gold and silver back to Europe, then it must generate a cash crop (e.g., tobacco).
3. To insure that colonies serve their economic role, European countries instituted a regulatory system that constricted colonial commerce to the maximum benefit of the home country. Protectionist measures included high tariffs to increase the price of goods from other European countries and force colonists to buy goods only from the home country. Great Britain created monopolies such as the East India Company in the tea trade to control all trade in that commodity. Colonies supplied raw materials to home industries and colonial policy discouraged the development of colonial industries that would compete with those home industries.

English Mercantilism

England sponsored its North American colonies under a mercantile system tempered by the fact that English colonies quickly became self-governing subdivisions of the British Empire inhabited by Englishmen (remember that in Virginia Colony a legislative assembly formed in 1619 and that the Pilgrims arrived in 1620 with the Mayflower Compact to set up colonial government).

The Navigation Acts (consolidated into one act in 1660) confined trade within the British Empire to English ships and seamen. Because the colonists were English, this act protected the New England shipping industry. England placed limitations on colonial enterprises that might compete with those at home. For example, the Wool Act of 1699, the Hat Act of 1732, and the Iron Act of 1750 restricted development of colonial manufactures of these products.

Colonial assemblies were also forbidden from imposing tariffs (taxes) on English imports as a way of encouraging colonial industries by making the cost of English goods higher than that of colonial-produced goods. But England encouraged other colonial enterprises such as Chesapeake tobacco when England forbade the growing of tobacco in England and placed prohibitive tariffs on competing Spanish tobacco. Lax British enforcement of restrictive provisions and the predominance of the British navy guaranteed that through the 17th century and the first half of the 18th, Great Britain and its colonies prospered under the mercantile system.
"Salutary Neglect" Ends

Great Britain and her American colonies stood tall in victory after the Seven Years' War, but both quickly stooped under enormous debt. That debt drove Britain to abandon "salutary neglect" and begin to enforce existing mercantilist measures and enact others. What is "salutary neglect"? "Salutary" means promoting health and Britain's lenient mercantilism had done just that for both the home country and the colonial economies. War debt forced a change. Besides the debt, Britain bore continuing expenses in the colonies because of the 10,000 British troops left stationed in the colonies at the end of the war.

"Join or Die"

Benjamin Franklin first published this woodcut illustration in 1754 to exhort the British-American colonies to unite against the French and the Indians. As colonial reaction to British measures intensified, the illustration was reprinted in newspapers across the colonies particularly in response to the 1765 Stamp Act.
Look at the illustration. What is meant by "join or die"?

This image was furnished by the Library of Congress Prints & Photographs:
British Parliament's Mercantilist Acts

Your *Digital History* textbook discusses the taxes Great Britain imposed and the colonial response from the 1764 Sugar Act to the 1774 Intolerable Acts. Read the textbook section closely and look at this tabular summary *Overview: Eleven British Measures that Led to Revolution.*"
First Continental Congress

The crisis caused by the Intolerable Acts spread across the 13 colonies and motivated the town meetings and colonial assemblies to choose representatives for a Continental Congress to gather in Philadelphia in September 1774. The delegates included the Adams cousins, Samuel and John, from Massachusetts and George Washington and Patrick Henry from Virginia. They met not to declare independence but through economic coercion to force Britain to rescind its harsh policies. The delegates insisted on their rights as Englishmen (they were all men) and declared the acts of Parliament passed since 1763 in violation of their rights. They vowed not only not to import or to consume British goods but also not to export colonial commodities to Britain or other British colonies until these acts were repealed. They did not, however, reject the
mercantilist system, but only its overly harsh enforcement. In effect, they longed for a return to "salutary neglect."

The meeting of the Continental Congress resulted in committees being formed across the colonies to enforce the sanctions (not importing from nor exporting to Britain). Those committees quickly emerged as local governments that organized militia companies, local courts, and combined to form colony-wide congresses. These committees laid the groundwork for independent government.

Begin to explore the Website for the PBS series Liberty! The American Revolution. The site includes some video streaming from the program (e.g., historian Pauline Maier describing the Boston Tea Party). Save the "Road to Revolution" game for later.

http://www.pbs.org/ktca/liberty/liberty.html (Right click and choose to open the site in a new window so that you may refer to the site again.)

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